

## **From Domestic Sphere to Public Space: Patssi Valdez's Bodily Manifestation of the Virgin of Guadalupe**

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### *Walking Mural*

On Christmas Eve of 1972, the Chicana art collective Asco, consisting of artists, Willie Herron, Patssi Valdez, Gronk, and Harry Gamboa Jr., performed *Walking Mural* (1972) on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles. This performance was a silent procession in which three Asco members wore elaborate costumes and paraded down the boulevard which was, at the time, overcrowded with last-minute Christmas shoppers. That year, the annual procession of Our Lady of Guadalupe in East Los Angeles had been canceled due to rioting. The procession normally took place in early December to commemorate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Virgin Mary's miraculous apparition to Juan Diego in December of 1531.<sup>1</sup> According to Valdez, "We [Asco] took it upon ourselves to create our own parade."<sup>2</sup> *Walking Mural* was thus in part conceptualized as a stand-in for the annual tradition. Herron positioned himself as the fourth head in a mural that had sprouted legs and removed itself from the wall. Valdez can be seen dressed as the Virgin of Guadalupe, standing next to Gronk, who is dressed as a chifon Christmas tree, complete with ornaments (Figure 1). Gamboa Jr. photographed the performance. *Walking Mural*, both, brought to life and critiqued the Mexican mural movement's perceived role as the sole artistic practice that defined and represented Mexicans and Chicanas.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the interplay between Valdez and Gronk's costumes interrogates religiosity in both Chicana and American culture, which culminates in the yearly, capitalistic celebration of Christmas. The multi-layered piece, *Walking Mural* continued Asco's tradition of over-the-top and highly critical performances. This paper focuses on the contribution of Patssi Valdez.



Figure 1. Asco, *Walking Mural*, December 24, 1972. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr., Collection of Harry Gamboa Jr.

In *Walking Mural*, Valdez paraded in a black crepe and a cardboard halo to become the physical embodiment of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Valdez's interpretation is a critical reproduction of the icon, which was, at the time, without antecedent. Valdez's subversive representation calls into question a Chicana woman's role in the domestic sphere and is an expression of the artist's position as a woman in the borderland of East Los Angeles, caught between Chicana traditionalism and new modes of expression. Furthermore, in *Walking Mural*, Valdez takes the traditionally interior and internalized domestic realm of the home altar and manifests it in the streets of East Los Angeles. Her body becomes the material reality of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is often present in the domestic realm of the home. In doing so, Valdez makes personal histories publicly visible and offers alternative narratives that disrupt the canon of Chicana identities.

### Home Altars and Embodied Spaces

The construction and maintenance of private devotional altars are a common practice in many religions. Chicana and Mexican home altars draw most heavily from Catholic traditions because Spanish colonizers in Mexico forcefully converted many Indigenous communities to Catholicism. However, many Mexican and Chicana people do not practice a strict form of Roman Catholicism, given that Indigenous people continued to practice and incorporate "pagan" traditions under the guise of Catholicism. The *tilma* image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is one of the most prominent

examples. According to certain writers, her Indigenous name is *Coatlatlopeuh*, and while the Catholic Church refuted many of her Indigenous characteristics, her brown skin remained.<sup>4</sup>

Within the Catholic home altar tradition, the maker assembles and arranges an area in a “bricoleur-style,” meaning composed or constructed of diverse and readily available materials, religious and personal images and objects, to create a sacred space within the home.<sup>5</sup> In Chicancx culture, altars are a traditionally a feminine space, built and maintained by women. These altars stand as a mediator that allows women to maintain a relationship with God, Jesus, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and saints. Altars provide a space to promote values that privilege social and familial relationships.<sup>6</sup> The making and maintaining of altars is a practice passed down from mother to daughter, as it is the woman’s responsibility to oversee religious affairs within the family and ensure familial welfare.<sup>7</sup> Altars are centers for establishing relational values and for cultivating relationships that link past, present, and future. These relationships are expressed physically, morally, religiously, and aesthetically in home altars, as a means of maintaining a “feminine-based understanding of social harmony” that emphasizes goodness, reproduction, and maternal practice, as discussed in more detail below.<sup>8</sup>

Some Chicancx scholars have pointed to altars as both a practice and space that privilege and perpetuate patriarchal ideals of womanhood and feminine values, including feminist, queer, Chicancx cultural theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa, whose observations are particularly relevant. Anzaldúa acknowledges the important role the Virgin of Guadalupe plays in Mexican heritage and ideology, as both a figure of solace and solidarity in *mestiza*, or Indigenous-Spanish mixed-race culture. However, she also states that the icon completes and perpetuates the “*virgen/puta* (virgin/whore)” dichotomy.<sup>9</sup> Within the Catholic church, the Virgin of Guadalupe has been used to dispense institutional oppression while placating Chicancx and Mexican followers who look to Guadalupe as a symbol of hope, survival, and acceptance.<sup>10</sup> Guadalupe, who is the aspirational virgin, is compared to *la Malinche*, an enslaved Nuhua woman named Malinalli, who acted as an interpreter, advisor, guide, and intermediary for the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés and later gave birth to his first son. Subsequently, she is widely perceived as the raped and maligned whore for acting as his mistress and a traitor to her people. These feminine mediators situated Chicana women in a place of social ambiguity, at once docile and ashamed. This ambiguity reinforces the virgin/whore binary.<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa claims that such an oppressive binary alienates queer women, career women, and self-autonomous women in Chicancx culture.<sup>12</sup> However, such a reductive reading leaves little space for the women who are empowered through their maintenance of altars. Independent scholar and folklorist, Kay Frances Turner acknowledges that Chicancx culture is predominantly patriarchal; however, she contends that altars are sites of personal female empowerment that allow women to practice and impart values different from those that may be culturally imposed upon them by men. While the home in its entirety is a traditionally female

sphere, Turner states that altars are a “space apart” that are, “built on the boundaries of patriarchal alienation.”<sup>13</sup> Altars provide a space within the home for women to assert themselves outside the purview of the patriarchy.



Figure 2. Valerie Walawender, *Untitled*, 2012. Photograph. Image courtesy of Valerie Walawender.

Esthetically, altars are performative spaces where relationships are visually rendered through signs and symbols that mark the self, others, the holy, and the divine through common and sacred objects, emphasizing materiality to reach transcendence.<sup>14</sup> All the objects and images promote interconnectedness through accumulation, repetition, and embellishment.<sup>15</sup> This is exceptionally clear when considering the visual components of a typical Mexican home altar. The untitled photograph by Valerie Walawender shows the unremarkable ubiquity of how the altar has been assembled on a table, placed in the corner of a communal living space in the home.<sup>16</sup> (Figure 2) Religious imagery abounds, the largest and most central image is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, rendered against American and Mexican flags, which, although placed on a Mexican home altar, is indicative of the strong familial ties Mexican and Chicana people must maintain between Mexico and the United States, as both a borderland space and literal border. Below the central image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a statue of the Virgin Mary, a statue of Christ, and a framed image of the Virgin and Child with a sticker with Christ’s image on the upper left corner. Under this framed Virgin and Child is a photograph of an elderly woman, likely a matriarch of the family. The altar-maker has placed a rosary and necklaces on the Christ figure.

To the left of the framed Virgin and Child image are other framed drawings of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the other is obscured by a vase of daisies placed in water. Farther to the left is a card with the Virgin of Guadalupe with the phrase “*Para Mi Mamá*” above the image. A fan is placed behind the prayer card. Other non-religious figurines have been placed on the flowered fabric that lines the table, which has a Mexican flag hanging over the edge. Some notable objects include a pot made of traditional Mexican earthenware, a pink lit candle, three unlit white candles in silver candleholders with bows tied around them, two small donkey figurines—one brown and painted with blue and red, the other made out of colorful braided rope, a blue prism filled with colorful orbs, a small basket, and a framed image of a crucifix with glass flowers along the base. Other objects remain out of the frame of the photograph.

Many of the images and figures featured in the photograph of the home altar have overt devotional purposes, such as images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is often placed as the central figure. The accumulation of images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin and Child likely indicates that this is an altar made to personally engage with the motherly, holy icon. Within the altar space, the photograph of the elderly woman is surrounded by religious images of the Virgin Mary in different forms. Placing the woman's photograph in the center of the altar facilitates relationships between the maker, the woman in the image, and the divine.

The image by Valerie Walawender was included in a blog entry about altar practices surrounding *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), a Mexican holiday that commemorates deceased loved ones and supports them on their spiritual journey.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the woman in the picture is a family member who has passed on. The proximity and proliferation of images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, complemented by the single image of the woman, signals parallels between the holy figure and the matriarch, who was entreated with watching over the family and household during her lifetime and continues to do so in the afterlife. Similarly, the Virgin of Guadalupe is meant to be watching over the woman and her family. Such a relationship, as cultivated through visual and material culture, exemplifies how altars function as spaces that prioritize maternal practice and familial bonds. While the other objects may appear random, the altar-maker was careful about what was placed in this sacred space, and where those objects were placed. Using objects that were favored by the deceased encourages their spirit to return to the home for Day of the Dead celebrations and carry on in the after-life once they are complete. The blending of the common, such as a toy, with the sacred, for example, religious statues marries objects of personal reference with devotional practice. Altars are cultivated and assembled over time, as indicated by the disparate styles and origins among the objects, which overlap and are carefully curated. Altars accumulate, change, and have the potential to grow in the future.

One cannot know the significance of each object to the altar, without speaking with the altar-maker. Each altar is deeply personal and carries with it meaning and memory for the altar-maker, such as what objects were chosen and why, memories of where and how these objects were found, and the object's connection to loved ones. Additionally, these images and objects continue to accumulate meaning and memory as their relationship with the Virgin is cultivated. The objects and images become imbued with memory, prayers, and pleas to the motherly icon. Jennifer Gonzalez calls altar practice "autotopography," or the physical mapping of ontological qualities that impart material memory and material history.<sup>18</sup> Altars are an extension of the maker, a receptacle of her specific life, where memories and history manifest in material objects. The accumulated artifacts, which make up the altar, are the embodiment of the maker.<sup>19</sup> Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuñiga understood the term embodiment as, "the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form."<sup>20</sup> As embodiments of their makers, altars are deeply personal and for this reason unique, ranging drastically from home to home.

### ***Domesticana* and Altars in Chicana Art Practice**

Culturally, the Chicana home altar has become a common motif in feminist Chicana art, perhaps best exemplified by artist and scholar, Amalia Mesa-Bains, whose most well-known altar-installations were made in the late 1980s and 1990s. Her early altars are esthetically inspired by those commonly found in Chicana homes. Her practice was part of the "Cultural Reclamation Project," established by Chicana scholars, including Shifra Goldman, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Victor Zamudio-Taylor, and Mesa-Bains, to stress cultural determinism and the breadth of Chicana identity.<sup>21</sup> These Chicana scholars wanted to determine and share how Chicana culture influences their particular communities and its constituents on an emotional and behavioral level. Re-contextualized outside of the domestic sphere, Mesa-Bains's "excavated altars," a term Chicana scholars used to describe the altar's symbolic removal from the home and repurposing in the museum as an altar-installation, spurred dialogue and informed viewers of Chicana traditional practices. According to Chicana arts and culture scholar, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Mesa-Bain's work is, "one example among innumerable efforts to validate and reinterpret Chicana vernacular traditions adapting them to vital new contexts," namely galleries as public spaces where those who are unfamiliar with Chicana art and culture can engage with it.<sup>22</sup>

Mesa-Bains's work is an example of what she terms *domesticana*, the female counterpart to *rasquache*.<sup>23</sup> Theorized by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, he described *rasquache* as an "underdog" approach in Chicana art that through ingenuity makes a virtue of impoverishment. Artists, such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Asco, David Avalos, Judy Baca, and more, who employ this mentality are able to create the most-from-the-least, an artistic act that is both defiant and inventive. Artists who incorporate *rasquache*, as a formal style, favors elaboration, ornamentation, and

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accumulation, often repurposing discarded materials and breathing new life into them. It is productive to note the similarities with altar practice, including but not limited to, making the most out of common objects. As such, works that are *rasquache*, including *Walking Mural* and *Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, as discussed here, have an ephemeral quality as they are often comprised of obsolescent or discarded materials. (Figure 3) Examples include creative self-fashioning with second-hand clothing, yard decor built out of tires, coffee tins, or broken mirrors. This can be seen in the way altars may include seemingly random yet meaningful trinkets or how the members of Asco used cardboard, tinfoil, tulle, and Christmas ornaments in *Walking Mural*. *Domesticana* adheres to the same sense of ingenuity but incorporates a celebration of the feminine, while resisting patriarchal Chicana culture.



Figure 3. Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, 1984, revised 1991. Mixed-media installation. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Mesa-Bains argues that in light of the 1960s and 1970s Chicano Civil Rights Movement, Chicana artists were compelled to redefine their own roles within Mexican/Chicana culture. To accomplish this, Chicana artists borrowed images, themes, and content from their traditionally constrictive female roles in the domestic realm in an effort to reclaim the past but also, to forge new, innovative futures.<sup>24</sup> Feminist scholar, Laura Gillman states that *domesticana* as a *mestiza* aesthetic is a “cultural repository” that, “critiques existing histories as well as reflects the reconstitution of erased histories,

identities, and modes of inquiry within shifting national and diasporic contexts.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, *domesticana* is an important theory and artistic practice that pushed against patriarchal constraints and redefined what it meant to be a Chicana.

In Mesa-Bains’s mixed-media installation *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, Mesa-Bains creates an altar-installation for the Mexican actress Dolores del Río, who was the first major cross-over Latina celebrity in Hollywood, and as such is an icon in Mexican and Latinx culture. (Figure 3) The altar-installation to the deceased actress is created in a museum setting. An image of actress Dolores del Río from the movie, *The Fugitive* (1947) is given a place of prominence in the altar. In the photograph, del Río is dressed with a white shroud over her head so that she resembles the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose blue cloak similarly drapes over her head. Placing the image at the top center borrows from the altar practice of having a central icon image, which is commonly the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Around the image, Mesa-Bains placed a figure of the Virgin, more framed images of Dolores del Río, flowers, candles, fabric, glitter are among the various objects arranged in a way that recalls the altar aesthetic of accumulation and excess. Many of the objects are found by the artist to be repurposed for the installation. Mesa-Bains imbues the objects with new meaning by placing them in relationship to one another and exhibiting them in a new context—the museum. The museum is a public space meant to be visited by many people, this is distinct from the private home where only select people may enter. It is within this public, museum context that people can become newly exposed to Chicana culture. Such a public practice enforces the cultural determinism that was pushed in the cultural reclamation project of the Chicano Movement. Mesa-Bains pays homage to Chicana culture, investing in “resistance and affirmation,” the two guiding principles of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Within the new museum context, the repurposed altar-installation resists white hegemony by bringing an artist of color and Chicana practice into a traditionally and majority white museum space. Mesa-Bain’s work affirms altar practice as a unique Chicana tradition that helps women sustain themselves.<sup>26</sup> Her work purposefully draws from the process of altar making. However, unlike the altar which is an embodied space that primarily reflects the maker, Mesa-Bains has placed many mirrors in the installation to reflect the viewers. She invited viewers to see themselves as part of the altar-installation and encouraged them to engage with the devotional practice of altar making. In reference to the altar-installation, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, Mesa-Bains stated:

The development of my work has been rooted in the practice and consciousness of my community. Through the traditions of the home altar and the celebrations of the Day of the Dead I have created a hybrid form of ephemeral installation. Both of these traditions of popular culture represent aspects of a redemptive and resilient struggle to maintain family history and



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cultural continuity in the face of colonial domination.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, it is productive to consider *domesticana* itself, and by extension *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, as rooted in home altar practice. Because of this debt, *domesticana*, and specifically altar practice, is a useful framework for understanding the work and goals of Chicax artists, including Patssi Valdez.

### Patssi Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe

Through a *domesticana* lens, Patssi Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe can be understood as the corporeal reality of Valdez's Chicax experience that is visually manifested and embodied in home altars, which she moves from the domestic sphere to a public space. Traditional renderings of the Virgin of Guadalupe follow standard iconographic cues: she wears a red dress that extends across her body and arms, and a blue cloak that covers her head and drapes over her shoulders down the length of her body. (Figure 4) Her head bows humbly and her eyes are downcast as her hands meet at her breast in prayer. She is surrounded by a mandorla of golden rays, indicating her holiness. She is youthful, divine, modest, feminine, and reverent.



Figure 4. Unidentified Artist, *Tilma Image of The Virgen de Guadalupe* presented by Saint Juan Diego, 1531. Public domain.

In Valdez's fashioning of the Virgin of Guadalupe, she wears a floor-length black dress with a thigh high slit that reveals black lace tights as she walks in black platform shoes. (Figure 1) On the back of her costume is a tinfoil skull attached to her halo. The use of the color black remains one of the significant distinctions between Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe and other, later subversive representations of the Virgin.<sup>28</sup> Valdez also wears a black cloak with silver edges that drapes over her shoulders, drawing directly from the Virgin's blue mantle. A pink boa adorns her neck and she carries a bouquet of red roses.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the youthful, natural appearance common in most depictions of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Valdez has painted her eyebrow-less face white, with black eyelids and lips. She has fashioned a tinfoil silver and gold crown, and created a cardboard mandorla, which was painted black and silver with white rays made of tinfoil. This is an iconographic sign that indicates she is dressed as the Virgin of Guadalupe and would be instantly recognizable to the Chicana community. However, the similarities end there: where the Virgin is modest, demure, cosmetic-free, and pristine, Valdez is revealing, challenging, and wearing excessive make-up.

Art historian, Terezita Romo provides the most widely accepted reading of Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe. Romo states that Valdez's interpretation challenged portrayals of the feminine icon as an ideal archetype of the passive, submissive, and virginal woman, traditionally revered within Catholic patriarchal Mexican culture. Valdez transformed this untouchable holy figure and created a contemporary persona that was stylish, powerful, and desirable.<sup>30</sup> While Romo's reading of Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe is useful and important, a *domesticana* reading allows us to understand how Valdez engages with altar practice, while a queer reading allows us to understand her subversive and culturally critical act.

Valdez was famous for her ability to create elaborate costumes with very little means, scouring thrift stores and using discarded materials. Her fashioning of the Virgin is no different. The cardboard and tinfoil crown and aura indicate a sense of ingenuity. Valdez fashioned trash and cheap materials into a costume that not only glimmers and is visually stimulating but also mimics holiness. The layers of her outfit and accumulation of fabric, make-up, accessories, and found materials resemble, in practice, the accumulative process by which altars become part of the intimate, personal, and embodied environment of the home. Within the framework of *domesticana*, Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe displays both the mentality of *rasquache* and an engagement with the feminine. However, Valdez's fashioning actively reevaluates and reinterprets the Virgin: it takes advantage of the Virgin of Guadalupe's symbolic force in Chicana culture and its function within the home to produce distinct layers of alternative meanings.

Understanding Valdez's biography allows the viewer to understand why her work questions Chicana traditionalism and seeks alternative modes of being. Born in Los Angeles and raised by her Mexican mother, Valdez was expected to work at her mother's

hair salon and carry on the family business. Instead, much to her mother's dismay, Valdez was drawn to the arts. Rather than turn away from tradition, or inversely, fall in line, Valdez engaged in an act of dis-identification. José Esteban Muñoz's defines his theory of dis-identification as an act in which those outside the mainstream of race, sexuality, or gender, do not simply disavow or align with mainstream practice, but rather reinterpret it for their own purposes.<sup>31</sup> Valdez exemplifies this when she dresses as the Virgin of Guadalupe in a manner that is subversive and outlandish.<sup>32</sup> Her costuming eschews traditional expectations and ideas regarding what it means to be a woman in Chicanx culture.

By extension, Valdez's performance also calls into question and alters through hypersexuality the very altars she references as embodied sites of female values and familial relationships. While Muñoz's theory and terminology are useful for understanding Valdez's act and motivations, it is inadequate in this case. Muñoz's theory is applicable to minority subjects who question white heteronormative society as exclusive and oppressive, not necessarily those who wish to reinterpret and open up new ways of being within their own community, whether this means embracing their sexuality, breaking with tradition, shirking religion, wearing exuberant clothing, or being an artist.

Valdez identifies with the Virgin of Guadalupe and Chicanx culture, and while she may have shirked her mother's wishes, her artistic practices incorporated the cosmetology skills she learned in her mother's beauty salon. This is directly opposed to distancing herself fully or engaging in a separation or rejection of tradition. Instead, Valdez's action is one of alter-identification: she works within Chicanx and familial tradition, but rather than simply repurposing to expose oppressive systems, she creates an alternate persona and, in the process, manifests different aspects of the same identity. Alter-identification, allows for multiple and varied experiences in a manner that embraces those modes of being that may be in conflict or opposition, such as being divine and impoverished, virginal and sexual, traditional and avant-garde. In this case, Valdez uses the Virgin of Guadalupe as a pivotal figure that encompasses many different facets and realizations of Chicanx knowledge and identity.

Sociologist, Laura Gillman states Chicanxs invoke symbolic representations as people who have been displaced and relocated, and whose identities are founded on personal histories manifested in embodied spaces.<sup>33</sup> This is apparent in their use of altars, but Gillman also argues that the body itself is a site of knowledge, a symbolic center of interrelations between people and their environment; the body is an embodied space.<sup>34</sup> It is possible to consider then two embodied spaces: the body as a site of personal and cultural knowledge and the altar as a receptacle for that knowledge. In *Walking Mural*, Valdez's body is the nexus where these two forms of embodied knowledge meet—evoking the deeply personal and the cultural referent. In the act of transforming herself into the Virgin of Guadalupe, and specifically, an

iconography that is particularly common in altars and important in Chicana identity, Valdez becomes the corporal materiality of her Mexican lineage. However, Valdez's performance is also imbued with her intersectional identity as a young Chicana woman and avant-garde artist who is neither dispossessed from her culture nor fully assimilated into the United States. This point is made clear through her act of alter-identification.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is an empowering figure that can be reimagined to encompass new femininities. This includes Valdez's alternative, sexualized, and expressive Virgin as an embodied figure and representation that opens up endless alter-identification potential because she embodies diverse identities that manifest themselves in the many experiences and actions of Chicanas. In this regard, she determines a potential third-form of subjectivity that Chicana scholar and postcolonial feminist theorist, Chela Sandoval defines as an, "anti-colonial, *mestiza*, U.S. feminist of color, queer, and differential conceptualization of the subject."<sup>35</sup> Third-form identities articulate a resistance to dominant society and, as Sandoval claims, constitute a, "place out of which a politicized differential consciousness arises."<sup>36</sup> This differential consciousness enables movement "between and among' ideological positionings" to transform power relations.<sup>37</sup>

Chicana feminist scholar, Emma Pérez states that differential consciousness is a "third space feminist practice" that can only occur within a "decolonial imaginary," which attempts to uncover the relegated, marginalized, erased, or silenced histories of Chicana women. In Pérez's summation, a third space practice is where agency is enacted.<sup>38</sup> Even so, it is important to consider that many Chicanas would feel isolated and apprehensive about Valdez's fashioning of the Virgin of Guadalupe because of their close association with, and affinity for, a more traditional Virgin. This point elicits some of the possible complications that arise from Valdez's act of alter-identification, such as the idea that those women who embrace Chicana traditionalism do not have agency within patriarchal cultural and familial structures. Quite the opposite, alter-identification as a third-form subjectivity and cultural practice can embrace opposing modes of thought simultaneously.

### **From Domestic Sphere to Public Space**

Valdez's performance makes the domestic hyper-visible. Such an act brings attention to Chicana women's need to create. As Kay Turner states, altar practice allows women to create, "spaces apart" from the oppression of patriarchal culture. Valdez's sexualizing of the Virgin of Guadalupe calls into question the patriarchal definition of the Virgin as a symbol of submissive femininity, as Romo pointed out.<sup>39</sup> Valdez's version also confronts Chicana traditionalism for demanding domesticity and encouraging propriety—though certainly not all women feel oppressed by these 'restraints.' Valdez neither disregards nor assimilates rather, she brings attention

to her personal experience as one means of intervention. As material objects are receptacles for values in altars, Valdez's fashioning may be read as a reflection of her own values. By making her own body hyper-visible, as a site of embodied knowledge, she reclaims her position in the public sphere. Her presence asserts that she will not be 'domesticated.'

Valdez's performance in *Walking Mural*, marching down Whittier Boulevard, recalls the annual processions of Our Lady of Guadalupe in East Los Angeles.

The annual procession traditionally includes local Catholic school students and parish communities parading an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe down Whittier Boulevard. The image, known as *la Peregrina*, is a reproduction of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe found on the *tilma* cloak located in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, Mexico. This is a celebration of the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe appearing to Juan Diego and honors the female icon as the protector of the family.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, the Virgin of Guadalupe does exist in the public sphere through processions. However, public processions are not divorced from the domestic sphere because *domesticana* ruptures binaries that separate the public and the private through the hyper-sexualization of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Valdez's performance.<sup>41</sup> Within this framework, popular sacred ceremonies including communal pageants, parades, and spectacles constitute the domestic because they both cultivate tradition, and pertain to the healing arts, both feminine realms.<sup>42</sup> If processions function as an extension of domestic practice, it is possible to consider that the annual processions of Our Lady of Guadalupe produce an environment in which the values embodied by the Virgin of Guadalupe are publicly manifested, proclaimed, and reinforced. Gillman elaborates on the subversive potential of traditional pageantry,

Within official Christianity, as exercised during the Conquest and colonialism, pageantry and spectacle constituted privileged forms of acculturation of Indigenous peoples and were used as subjugating tools. In the *domesticana* tradition, there is a parodic, subversive element introduced, one that opens up the possibility for the critique of gender, race, and class subjugation that official events aim to produce... [processions] subvert the very institutes that had exploited them. In this way, such processions are transgressive, and have pragmatic ends—to reclaim and reconstitute the paces they have come to inhibit, marking them as their own.<sup>43</sup>

Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe is in dialogue with altar practice and the domestic sphere. Furthermore, Valdez's participation in *Walking Mural*, as a public procession, continues to function within the *domesticana* framework as a highly subversive act. Drawing upon procession traditions, which she would have experienced first-hand in East Los Angeles, makes Valdez's subversive performance legible to her community. Valdez's mirroring of the Virgin of Guadalupe's procession does not deter from her

hyper-visibility by simply reiterating already public displays of the Virgin; rather, because it differs so drastically from traditional renderings of the icon, Valdez's presence is all the more jarring. Additionally, the artist draws on the tradition of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a walking image, an image that brings the altar into the public space of the community to support and publicly sanction the domestic values of the Virgin, whether those empower some women and/or constrain others.<sup>44</sup> As stated in the Gillman quote above, pageantry already functions subversively by reclaiming borderland spaces that have traditionally belonged to Chicana and Latina transgressors. The alter-identification of Valdez's performance becomes more subversive because she utilizes the power implicit in public processions, but turns those traditional values back in on themselves. However, it is impossible to accomplish a holistic reading of Valdez's Virgin and the *Walking Mural* procession without considering her in collaboration with the other members of Asco who also took part in the performance.

### **Turning the Inside Out**

In Romo's reading of *Walking Mural*, she claims that as the sole female member of Asco, Valdez had a lasting impact on Chicana art, specifically by making what is considered an untouchable icon within traditional Mexican and Chicana culture subject to interpretation, and offering an empowering mode of female representation in Chicana culture.<sup>45</sup> Not unlike this investigation, Romo focuses on Valdez singularly, and this feminist distinction has lasting implications for the understanding of Chicana art and culture. Yet, it is still important to fully understand the exchange between Valdez and Asco's male members in *Walking Mural*.

Asco member Willie Heron is dressed as the fourth head in the Mexican mural. The other papier-mâché heads hover over Herron's with arms outstretched and face aghast. Herron has also painted his face white to match the ghostly pallor of the other faces. Ostensibly, his character had become so bored with the genre of mural painting and the demands of Chicano nationalism he decided to remove himself from the wall and begin walking.<sup>46</sup> Gronk is dressed as a chiffon Christmas tree with ornaments hanging off the fabric. The area around his face and shoulders is shrouded in red and black chiffon, as well as tinsel around his face, his painted his face white with a red star.

*Walking Mural* has been discussed heavily in the Asco literature as a performance that subverts Mexican-American traditionalism and stereotypes. The murals created by *Los Tres Grandes*, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alvaro Siqueiros, who all worked in both the United States and Mexico, often depicted affirmative images of working-class people that spoke to the artists' communist ideals, elevated the Indigenous figure, praised labor, and elicited nationalist sentiments.<sup>47</sup> Mural practice was not confined to Mexico it was also heavily practiced throughout

East Los Angeles as well. In East Los Angeles, many of the murals were executed under the auspices of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement's nationalistic rhetoric, as opposed to their earlier Mexican counterparts that were created in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. Asco's embodied mural, which they imagined as being ripped from the wall and then paraded down the street, calls into question what a "good" Mexican should look like. This is because restrictive representations, however positive, were just as problematic and confining as the negative representations of the violent, gangster Chicano that existed in Hollywood films. Further, orthodox representations of what a Chicano "is" fails to take into consideration the many different, sometimes contradictory, lived experiences of Chicanos.<sup>48</sup> Art historian Ila Sheren considers *Walking Mural* within the framework of "stereotype" as defined by art historian Michael Orwicz. Sheren states that Asco's use of stereotypes point to a lack of innovation in Chicano visual language while simultaneously critiquing *Chicanismo* nationalism, as akin to religious dogma in Chicano culture and points to the performativity of the Chicano identity.<sup>49</sup>

The Virgin of Guadalupe as an icon does have precedent in mural tradition and the representation of religious figures in Mexican and Chicano murals is almost ubiquitous.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, Valdez's presence elaborates Asco's critical attention to artistic representations of Chicanos as singularly devout. Furthermore, her position in the parade next to Gronk creates parallels between the Virgin figure and his Christmas tree. The performance took place on Christmas Eve on Whittier Boulevard, which would have been overrun with Christmas shoppers. The interplay between Valdez and Gronk interrogates religiosity in both Chicano and American culture, which culminates in yearly capitalistic celebrations. In this regard, their presence is a physical intervention that disrupts the flow of consumer culture.

Art critic, John Beagles refers to Asco's subversive exploration of traditional mediums and subjects, such as murals and religiosity as being "doubly dislocated."<sup>51</sup> On the one hand, as Chicanos, they experienced alienation and brutality at the hand of white America, and on the other, as young, queer artists growing up in Mexican-American homes with traditional values, they felt removed from their Mexican heritage. Asco member Harry Gamboa Jr. spoke to this double bind when he stated:

Either the police were going to take care of you or someone in the neighborhood was going to take care of you. So, you met a lot of resistance because it [Chicano culture] was so conservative. And to even stray into the sensitive area of religious icons or even hinting that you might not believe in certain things or might even question what America is all about, again, you were setting yourself up to be someone that's punished.<sup>52</sup>

Gamboa acknowledges that there is aggression coming from both sides: the white police and Asco's conservative Chicano community. As such, Asco's work not only

functioned within the boundaries of what was acceptable and what was not in Chicana visual culture, it existed in the borderland of established Chicana forms and the avant-garde in 1970s United States Art. The performance unfolds as a complex narrative of what it is like to exist in a borderland space. Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe alongside the male Asco members, elaborates on many of the traditional forms and customs established in Chicana culture while simultaneously being critical of them. While this is well established, however, this investigation brings new light to the performance by considering how Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe gives corporeal materiality to the embodied experiences of Chicanas, present and visible in home altars.

Under the new framework of alter-identification, it is possible to reconsider the entire act of *Walking Mural*. Rather than a static mural that has suddenly decided to leave the wall, this activation cracks open the wall entirely, revealing the interior and exposing it to the public. When we consider this action, *Walking Mural* does not only "break free" of Chicana traditionalism, it turns the entire system inside out and opens it up to new revelations. Walking along Whittier Boulevard, these traditions and histories simultaneously leave the home, which is an act of revolt, and become enveloped in the community, which is an act of embrace. While it is true Asco members feared for their safety, and certainly some members of the community were appalled, other onlookers joined in on the festivities.<sup>53</sup> In this way it is possible to think of *Walking Mural* within the framework of alter-identification; they present a new type of mural, not simply a critical rejection of the practice. There exists in borderland spaces a push and a pull, to be critical is to look in, to be referential is to turn inside out, and here, the two happen simultaneously. The effect is innumerable possible modes of being, experiencing, and representing emerge in the process.

## Conclusion

With her contribution, Valdez assisted Asco in the critique of Chicana religiosity, but her presence brings to light the specific concerns of women in Chicana culture, including her own. In Chicana tradition, altars are embodied spaces, they act as material receptacles for personal and cultural knowledge, histories, and values. However, even though they are important sites of cultural knowledge, as feminine spaces they remain relegated to the interior, with the exception of when made public through yearly processions of the Virgin of Guadalupe that further reinforce the values of maternity, propriety, and domesticity that are advocated in domestic altar spaces. While this may be empowering for many women, at least in Valdez's case, such traditional roles and expectations were and are, both confining and open to critique. Valdez engages in said critique by becoming the corporeal materiality of the altar.



A *domesticana* reading of her self-fashioning allows us to consider how she both recalls, draws from, and questions altar practice as complacent in the patriarchal relegation of women to the home. However, we can also see how her engagement with the practice acknowledges that these spaces are fraught with cultural memory and venerable traditions. Rather than turn away, she performs an act of alter-identification, marshaling Chicax tradition in a way that brings attention to her concerns by imagining an alternative Virgin. She makes the domestic and personal hyper-visible, as an affront to both the perceived constraints of the patriarchy, and her own navigation of life in a borderland space, being neither tied to tradition, nor completely divorced from her roots. Unquestionably, Valdez is a bodily manifestation of the distinctly layered and complicated history of Chicana women who, like herself, inhabit the borderland of East Los Angeles.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Archdiocese of Los Angeles, "Archdiocese honors Our Lady of Guadalupe." Accessed September 6, 2019. <http://www.la-archdiocese.org/events/guadalupe/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Tere Romo, "Conceptually Divine: Patssi Valdez's Virgin de Guadalupe," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art, 2011), 276.

<sup>3</sup> Chicax is a gender-neutral nomenclature for people of Mexican heritage living in the United States; it is inclusive to men, women, and non-binary people. I use the gender specific "Chicana" when referring specifically to women.

An interaction between Asco member Harry Gamboa Jr. and the then curator of LACMA illuminated some of the misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding Chicax as artistic producers. Gamboa, on a visit to LACMA, confronted a curator and asked why there was no Chicax art on display. The curator responded that Chicax do not make art, they make graffiti. While not directly linked to Mexican and Chicano Movement muralism, I believe this interaction is telling and speaks to the proliferation of misconceptions surrounding Chicax art.

Chon A. Noriega, "Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971—75," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* no. 19 (Autumn/Winter, 2008): 109.

<sup>4</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 50-54.

<sup>5</sup> Kay Francis Turner, "Mexican American Women's Home Altars: The Art of Relationship" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1990), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-166, 198, 205, 230.

<sup>9</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Turner, "Mexican American Women's Home Altars," 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>16</sup> The photograph was taken by "Artist and Creativity Consultant" Valerie Walawender and posted on her personal blog. The blog entry was titled "Mexican Traditions" and can be found at: <https://valeriewalawender.wordpress.com/folk-traditional-arts/mexican-traditions/>. Because of the poor labeling on the site I cannot be certain who the altar belongs to/ who the maker is. I also did not use any of the information on the website to inform my reading as I cannot speak to Walawender's credibility.

<sup>17</sup> Valerie Walawender, "Mexican Traditions," *Valerie Walawender: Art and Psychology, Lessons on Violence, Diversity, Art, Folklore, Cultural events in Chautauqua County, New York* (blog), 2012,

<https://valeriewalawender.wordpress.com/folk-traditional-arts/mexican-traditions/>.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer González, "Siting Histories: Material Culture and the Politics of Display in the Work of Fred Wilson, Pepón Osorio, and Amalia Mesa-Bains, 1985-1995" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Cruz, 1996), 340.

<sup>19</sup> Embodiment, for the purpose of this paper, is a term I use to signify the way in which objects, or spaces, are repositories for memory, history, and culture.

<sup>20</sup> Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuñiga, *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, Laura Meyer and Alex Espinoza, *Amalia Mesa-Bains: Geography of Memory*, ed. Laura Meyer (Fresno, CA: Fresno Art Museum, Press at the California State University, 2011), 4.

<sup>22</sup> González, "Siting Histories," 339.

<sup>23</sup> Domesticana marries the words "domestic" and "Chicana." According to Mesa-Bains, "The day-to-day experience of working-class Chicanas is replete with the practices within the domestic space. The sphere of the domestic includes home embellishments, home altar maintenance, healing traditions, and personal feminine pose or style...The phenomenon of the home altar is perhaps the most prolific." She continues, "...the domestic sphere – with all its social roles and practices – culturally remains fixed in patriarchy unless representation of that world calls into question such practices and thereby contributes to its change."

Amalia Mesa-Bains, "'Domesticana': The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* vol. 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 160, 162.

<sup>24</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, "El Mundo Feminine: Chicana Artists of the Movement — A Commentary on Development and Production," in *Chicano Art: Resistance and*

*Affirmation, 1965-1985*, ed. Richard Griswold del Castillo, et al. (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991), 140.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Gillman, *Unassimilable Feminisms: Reappraising Feminist, Womanist, and Mestiza Identity Politics* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 176.

<sup>26</sup> bell hooks and Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 72.

<sup>27</sup> "Amalia Mesa-Bains: Artist Statement, 1995," ZoneZero, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://v1.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/ymesa2.html>.

<sup>28</sup> The proliferation of the color black may be read for its negative connotations; black is the color of mourning in Chicana culture. Additionally, the large skull attached to her back further connotes death and may be an iconographic reference to the folk saint (she is condemned by the Catholic church) Our Lady of the Holy Death, or Santa Muerte and celebrations or parades for Día de Los Muertos.

Later, subversive representations of Guadalupe, by artists such as Yolanda Lopez (in 1978), Ester Hernandez (in 1975), and Alma Lopez (in 1999), re-interpret Guadalupe as self-portraits, *abuelas*, seamstresses, athletes, or queer, but none of these use the color black to the extent Valdez does.

<sup>29</sup> Our Lady of Guadalupe is associated with a "miracle of the roses," a miracle in which roses manifest as the result of holy intervention. In 1531, the Virgin chose Indigenous man Juan Diego to convey a message to an unwilling bishop, and builds a temple in her honor. After three failed attempts, the Virgin of Guadalupe directed Diego towards roses that were growing unceremoniously in winter, which he picked and brought to the Virgin. She then arranged the roses and gave them to Diego hide in his cloak and bring to show the bishop. When Diego opened his cloak (or *tilma*), the roses fell and revealed an image of the Virgin. After this miracle, the bishop was convinced. The original *tilma* with the image of the Virgin remains preserved and hangs over the altar of the Guadalupe Basilica and is the archetypal representation of the Virgin commonly found throughout Mexican and Chicana culture.

It is possible that in referencing the roses Valdez gives special emphasis to the role of the Mexican native. In this case, we can elaborate our understanding of Valdez's Virgin as placing some emphasis on the importance of the native in Mexican culture and Catholic tradition. Further, we may be able to understand Valdez acting in part as Juan Diego, becoming both male and female.

<sup>30</sup> Romo, "Conceptually Divine," 280-282.

<sup>31</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, Cultural Studies of the Americas*, vol. 2. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>32</sup> The pilgrimage to the Virgen de Guadalupe attracts about 2 million people a year, almost as much or more than the Hajj in Mecca.

<sup>33</sup> Gillman, *Unassimilable Feminisms*, 135.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), xvi.

<sup>39</sup> Romo, *Conceptually Divine*, 276-282.

<sup>40</sup> Archdiocese of Los Angeles, "Archdiocese honors Our Lady of Guadalupe."

<sup>41</sup> Gillman, *Unassimilable Feminisms*, 174.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> We can also think of Valdez's performance as in-line with the growing tradition of performance art throughout the Feminist Movement of the 1970s. However, it is also important to acknowledge the racial biases that played out in this first and second wave of feminism by excluding the experiences and concerns of women of color. As a young Chicana woman Valdez felt excluded from this growing (art) movement and has verbally repudiated feminism.

Patssi Valdez, "Asco and Beyond: A Talk by Patssi Valdez," YouTube video, 1:15:00, Posted by "UC Berkeley Events," March 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TldwMT4zyOY>.

<sup>45</sup> Romo, *Conceptually Divine*, 282.

The Virgin as motif would be adopted by many Chicana artists. Ester Hernández images of the Virgin are devotional as she attempts to layer traditional meaning with the modern while speaking to her own experiences. Hernández's paintings of the Virgin are imbued with a militant energy and actively work against gender and social roles. Yolanda López, who is most well-known for *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*, from her *Guadalupe* series, 1978, use the Virgin to deconstruct the figure as a tool for social control and recasts the Virgin as the everyday woman. Other contemporary artists who have reimagined this sacred icon include Santa Barraza, Alma Lopez, Delilah Montoya and Ana de Obregoso among others. It is widely regarded within the scholarship (by Amalia Messabains, Tere Romo, and Laura Perez) that Valdez was the first to revise the Virgin icon Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarno, "Remapping America in Ester Hernández's *Libertad* and Yolanda López's *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?*" in *Born of Resistance: Cara a Cara Encounters with Chicana/o Visual Culture*, ed. Scott L. Baugh and Víctor A. Sorell (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 55-59.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Lambert, *A People's Art History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013), 243.

<sup>47</sup> Lambert, *A People's Art History of the United States*, 246-247.

<sup>48</sup> Chon Noriega, "'Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971-75," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 19 (Autumn/Winter 2008): 114-115.

<sup>49</sup> Ila Nicole Sheren, *Portable Borders: Performance Art and Politics on the U.S. Frontera Since 1984* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 45-46.

<sup>50</sup> Such motifs are notably present in Mexican Muralism's early phase, including Diego Rivera's *Creation* (1922-23). *Creation* was Rivera's first government commission, a wall fresco painted at San Ildefonso College, Mexico City, Mexico. Among other things the mural includes the divine trinity, depictions of Adam and Eve, and the personifications of Christian values. While many of the murals Asco would have experienced in their day-to-day lives no longer exist, the tradition of religious imagery can still be observed throughout East Los Angeles, from Juan Ordunez's *Where Heroes Are Born* (1981) to Paul Botello's *Virgin's Seed* (1991) to George Yepes's *Mujer Del Este De Los Angeles* (1989). Each of these murals makes overt (figural) reference to the Virgin and/or other religious figures.

<sup>51</sup> John Beagles, "Artmoreorless," *Sight & Sound Magazine* (January 2014): 58-61.

<sup>52</sup> Lambert, *A People's Art History of the United States*, 246-247.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.